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Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. 262 pages.

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Since its beginning in the 1970s, the field of Television Studies has often struggled to distinguish itself amongst older and more prestigious fields of humanistic research. Leading research universities have provided it with little institutional support or scholarly attention, and too often it has been relegated to the back offices of English or Cinema Studies departments. To some degree the poor regard given Television Studies is the field's own fault: its textual objects have tended either to be obscure or crassly popular, its approach to audiences condescending or overly celebratory, and its methodology a contradictory mix of MBA-style industrial research and progressive, leftwing politics. Indeed, it is often difficult to *place* the project of television studies, which is absent the kind of claims for formal distinction (as with "the literary" or "the cinematic") that serve as the foundation for English or Cinema Studies.

If Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV* is any indication, however, this lack of a stable institutional locus can occasionally give rise to work that is in breadth interdisciplinary and in methodology trailblazing. Winner of the 2009 SCMS Katherine Singer Kovacs Book Award, *Heartland TV* argues for new approaches to United States network television history, the politics of representation (and its relation to marketing), and the study of regional identity in America. Its thesis is that the development of television, both as an industry and as an aesthetic medium, was shaped by and in turn came to shape the myth of the Midwest as the symbolic Heartland of the United States. To prove this, Johnson narrates a history of the United States that begins in the 1920s with debates over the allocation of broadcast frequencies in the country's center and ends in 2000 with *USA Today's* red-state/blue-state election map.

To tell this history, Johnson relies upon a vast variety of texts and approaches to analyzing them. Indeed, much of the pleasure to be had in reading *Heartland TV* comes from watching Johnson take what appears to be trivial texts, such as a newspaper review of *The Lawrence Welk Show* or mid-90s ads for the Subaru Forrester, and through close reading and production history demonstrate some of the key forces shaping the development of political identity in postwar America. Each of the book's six chapters advances the argument about regionalism and the development of television by focusing on a different historical period and industrial issue. Chapter 1 traces how perceived differences in regional demographics intertwined with debates about television's duties as a "public good" to shape FRC and FCC policy. Chapter 2 maps out the difficulties television faced in its attempt to establish *national* broadcast culture in the 1950s. In Chapter

3, Johnson uses an episode of *CBS Reports* from the mid-60s to show how television documentaries both contributed to the myth of “middle America” and, through the elicitation of audience feedback, also occasionally deconstructed this myth. Chapters 4 and 5 each examine representations of midwestern identity through sitcoms, the former focusing on “square-ness” in the shows of MTM Productions and the latter homosexuality in *Roseanne* and *Ellen*. The final chapter, which will likely be of particular interest to scholars of contemporary American history, reads television anniversary memorials for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing in order to demonstrate how television relied upon regional exceptionalism to explain acts of terrorism in the U.S. before 9/11.

As the list of chapter titles should suggest, one of the *Heartland TV*'s strengths is its author's ability to marshal multiple modes of research and analysis to support her arguments. Though Johnson is a superb close reader of aesthetic texts, she also demonstrates an impressive facility for policy analysis, technological history, and industrial economics. The confluence of such disparate methodologies in a work of humanistic scholarship often sounds better in theory than it works in practice, but in Johnson's case these methodologies combine to produce a work of extraordinary subtlety and insight. Indeed, their easy melding positions *Heartland TV* as a rare instance of interdisciplinary scholarship that is both ambitious and successful. To some degree, this success is enabled by Johnson's deliberate and extremely careful objectivity. Even when addressing political positions to which most academics are opposed, Johnson is careful to avoid judgment or moralizing. The picture she strives to give us instead is a dispassionate one of different political projects and identities

circulating in post-war America.

If *Heartland TV* deserves any criticism it is that the book's style is not inviting to non-academic or undergraduate readers. Though this is primarily an effect of the complexity of the book's arguments—and thus, to a large extent, something out of Johnson's control—the organization of the chapters unnecessarily aggravates the difficulty of the prose. The first section of each chapter contains the densest prose, much of it dedicated to theoretical issues and what one might call meta-methodology (lit reviews, field history, etc). A lower barrier to entry might have been achieved by interspersing the such issues throughout the bodies of the chapters or, where that was not possible, by leading with a close reading to help orient the non-professional reader. This is, however, a minor complaint and one that should have no bearing on academic audiences.

Ultimately, *Heartland TV's* interdisciplinary approach may lead one to wonder whether the book should be considered a work of Television Studies at all. Certainly, the book's main subject is television, but *Heartland TV* manages to avoid all of the problems that frequently beset such scholarship. Instead of critiquing or defending "popular" media, it strives to explore how populism in America gets constructed throughout post-war history. Instead of faulting or celebrating audiences (or media corporations), it unravels the many ways citizens participated in shaping the television industry and its programming. Indeed, *Heartland TV's* greatest scholarly contribution is probably not to Television Studies but rather to American Studies, which is still in the process of developing methodologies capable of accounting for the United States' rich regional and political diversity. By unraveling the way in which perceived regional identities shape and are in turn shaped

by larger national identities, *Heartland TV* serves as a model of what a sophisticated, dialectical approach to American diversity should look like. In the end, what may be most extraordinary about *Heartland TV* is that Johnson, by developing a rigorous, interdisciplinary method to study television's history, was able to produce, from the academic "no-place" of Television Studies, a cutting-edge study of the meaning of place in America.